

The City of Brotherly **Suds**

Philadelphia Stumps to Become the Nation's Top Craft Beer Destination
By John Encarnacion





When *Frommer's* named Philadelphia among the world's best cities for beer this past June, it marked widespread recognition of what many Philadelphians have been aware of for the past few years. Philadelphia – and the surrounding region – is a great place for those who like good beer.



Some may find it surprising that Philadelphia was recognized by Frommer's as one of only three U.S. cities, along with Milwaukee and Portland, Ore., out of the 14 worldwide. Survey the region, however, and you will find excellent local beers as well as an expanding array of bars and restaurants specializing in serving good beer (read: NOT Miller Lite, Budweiser or Coors Light). The city is more than worthy to be named alongside other notable beer cities such as Dublin, Munich and Brussels.

In particular, the craft beer scene has significantly risen into prominence. The Brewers Association defines a craft beer as a beer brewed with an annual production of less than two million barrels, with less than 25 percent of the brewery owned or controlled by an alcoholic beverage industry member who is not themselves a craft brewer. Craft beers, which currently make up about seven percent of the volume of beer sold in the country, are made with traditional ingredients, such as malted barley, and tend to be distinctive and flavorful rather than simply catering to mass appeal. Because of added flavor, craft beers tend to be a little more expensive than your run-of-the-mill commercial beer. Still, growing numbers of craft beer drinkers don't seem to mind paying a slight premium for tastier beer.

Whether it is locally brewed products or domestic beers that have garnered national and worldwide recognition being available in the area, the Philadelphia craft beer scene is vibrant and deserving of acclaim. Annual events such as the Philly Craft Beer Festival and Philly Beer Week have helped solidify Philadelphia's reputation, echoed by Beer Week's tagline, as "America's Best Beer-Drinking City."

So how did Philadelphia reach this status? How did a city, whose last major brewery, Schmidt's, shut down in 1987, rise into prominence in the beer-drinking world? The answer is a combination of factors: good beer bars popping up in virtually every neighborhood, local craft brewers developing innovative beers and Philly Beer Week growing, in numbers of events and venues, to becoming the largest festival of its kind devoted to craft beers.

THE RISE OF NEIGHBORHOOD BARS

It all starts with bars. If you want to drink good beer beyond "TV" beer, you're probably going to need to find a bar that serves it. Given Pennsylvania's currently restrictive beer laws, it's a challenge to find specialty beers in stores, particularly if you don't want to shell out for full cases.

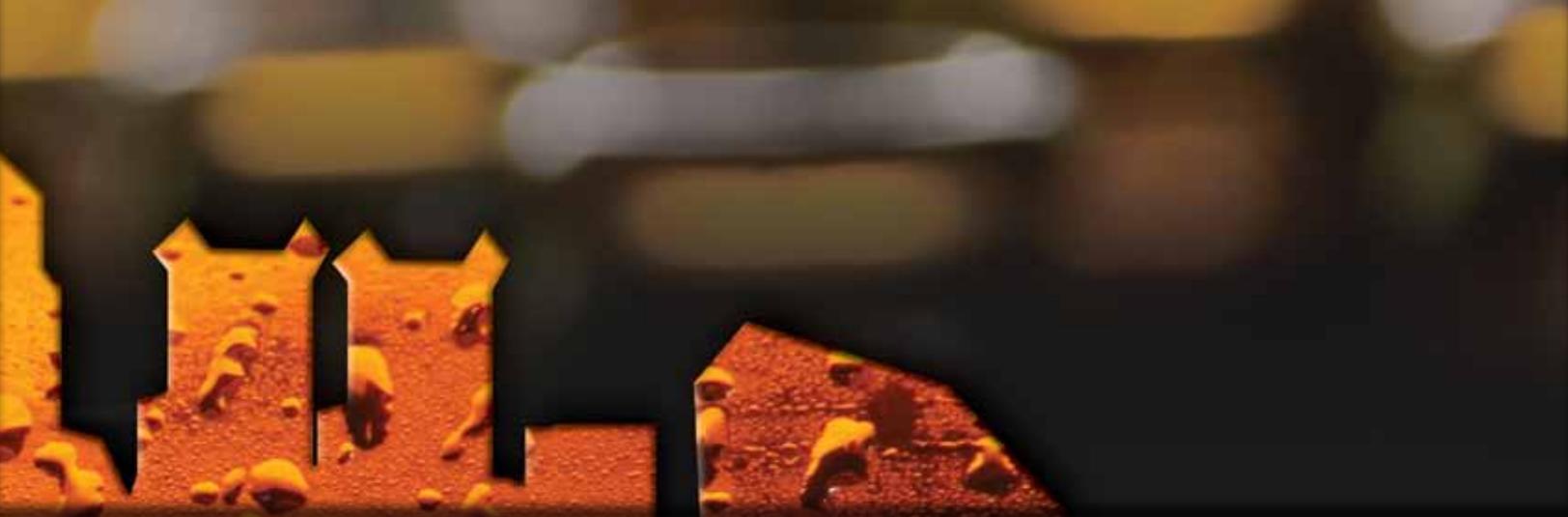
Fortunately, Philadelphia has featured excellent beer bars for many years. It's these bars, as much as or more than any other factor, that have helped the city's rise to beer prominence.

"This city has always had a ton of very good neighborhood bars – far more, obviously, than brewers," said Don Russell, who writes the "Joe Sixpack" beer column for the *Philadelphia Daily News*. "Before there were craft brewers in Philly, there were very good beer bars – notably, the Khyber, which has been a great beer destination since the 1970s. I've made the point before that many local brewers, in fact, were inspired by the great beers they were drinking in Philly bars. It's one of the reasons that every local brewer makes at least one Belgian-style ale – they first tasted the style in places like Bridgid's or Copa Too."

What has occurred in the past few years is a dramatic increase in the number of neighborhood spots that specialize in serving good beers. Much of the credit should probably go to Monk's Café, which was opened in Center City on South 16th Street in 1985. Before it started winning acclaim such as one of the "Top 10 Places in the WORLD to Have A Beer Before You Die" in *All About Beer* magazine, Monk's is believed to be the first bar in the country to have Belgian beer available on tap, which led to the rise of the popularity of Belgian beer in the city. By extension, craft brewers produced Belgian-style beers and other distinct products that soon made their way to the city's bars. Over time, sports bars, Irish bars and even dive bars began serving craft beers, in addition to the usual fare of commercial beers.

Specifically, though, gastropubs – which serve high-quality food in addition to good beer – and bars specializing in serving craft beers have grown widespread in much of the city. Walk into Resurrection Ale House, located across from

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Naval Square at Grays Ferry Avenue and Catharine Street, and you will find a place that probably would not have existed even five years ago. Opened in fall 2009, this small, split-level bar hardly falls into the conception of a traditional neighborhood bar. In addition to an extensive bottled beer list, it features 13 beers on tap – all of which are craft beers. Don't go looking for Bud Light or even Rolling Rock. Instead, the draught list features highly rated beers, such as Russian River Consecration, Lost Abbey Judgment Ale and Great Divide Yeti. Pay another visit a few weeks later, and chances are, there will be a completely different selection of quality brews.

"We change the beers anywhere from three days to three weeks," said Sean McGuinness, a Resurrection Ale House bartender.

A few blocks over at Ten Stone Bar & Restaurant, located at 21st and South streets, there's a similar selection of 14 beers on draught. Sure, you'll find Hoegaarden, Stella Artois and Yuengling Lager, but there's also Palm Belgian Amber, Port Brewing Company Shark Attack, Great Divide Wild Raspberry Ale and Petrus Oak Aged Ale. Nearby at The Pub and Kitchen, at 20th and Lombard streets, the owners are fond of Founders Brewing Company and Sixpoint Craft Ales, so the bar usually features these beers among its nine on tap. Bar patrons sometimes take the quality of available beer for granted to the point where good Belgian-style beers such as Allagash White are considered almost commonplace.

Of course, it does no good for bars to serve the specialty beers if the bartenders don't know much about the beers to explain them to customers.

Fortunately, as a whole, Philadelphia bartenders that serve craft beers don't have that problem.

"One of the reasons Philadelphia is such a great beer city is that in any of our craft beer bars, you will find bartenders who are extremely knowledgeable and enthusiastic about the beers being offered at their bars and very eager to discuss them with their customers," said Rob Jones, a Resurrection Ale House patron.

Ask a bartender at Ten Stone about what a particular Victory Brewing beer is like, and he'll tell you about its taste and that it's slightly stronger at eight percent alcohol. Order a Dogfish Head Festina Peche, and he'll make sure to both warn you of the slightly sour taste and mention that the beer also mixes well with Fruli Strawberry Wheat for a nice summer sweet-and-sour taste.

Perhaps by extension, Philadelphians have developed into sophisticated beer drinkers.

"When I first started writing Joe Sixpack in the mid-90s, my editors were worried that the audience of knowledgeable craft beer drinkers would be quite small," said Russell. "In fact, I never had to dumb down my column because so many readers were thirsty for something other than heavily advertised mainstream beers. I was writing about lambic, for example, when you couldn't even buy the stuff in Philly.

"Still, I'm astounded at the level of knowledge, especially among patrons. Go to Monk's and just watch what people order: incredibly exotic brews, some of which even I haven't tasted. I don't know if this is peculiar to Philly, but as I've frequently said, we'll drink anything."

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE LOCAL CRAFT BEERS

As of the time of its 100th year of brewing beer in 1960, Schmidt's was brewing more than 2.2 million barrels, the vast majority of which were sold in Philadelphia. When Schmidt's closed in 1987, only a few area breweries, such as Yuengling in Pottsville, were left.

Fortunately, on the heels of Schmidt's closing its doors in 1987, Ed and Carol Stoudt opened the state's first microbrewery, Stoudt's Brewing Company, in Adamstown, Lancaster County. Stoudt's specializes in German-style as well as English and American ales.

The 1990s brought the emergence of local breweries such as Yards Brewing Company (Philadelphia), Flying Fish Brewing Company (Cherry Hill), Dogfish Head Brewery (Milton, Del.), Troegs Brewery (Harrisburg) and Victory Brewing Company (Downingtown). Yards is particularly known for its Brawler, an English ale, and Philadelphia Pale Ale, which was named by *The New York Times* as one of the best pale ales in the country. Flying Fish produces a Belgian Abbey Dubbel and several ales year-round, but it receives particular praise for its seasonals. Dogfish Head boasts "off-centered" ales and experimental beer. You can find a stout, multiple ales, a double bock and pilsners among the varied selection offered by Troegs, which is technically based in Harrisburg but only distributes to within three hours driving distance of the brewery. Victory features more than 20 different brands, including the HopDevil Ale and Prima Pils.

In 2001, the forerunner to what is now known as Philadelphia Brewing

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Company started brewing in the Kensington section of the city. In addition to producing ales and Belgian-style beers, Philadelphia Brewing Company pays homage to the region, with beer names such as Kenzinger, Newbold, Rowhouse Red, Fleur de Lehigh and, of course, Walt Wit.

These particular craft brewers all produce varied styles of beer to appeal to many tastes.

“Unlike the West Coast, which is hops-centric, there’s no particular style that’s prevalent in Philly,” said Russell. “That’s one of the region’s assets: diversity. We have a strong Belgian presence, lots of British-style ales and certainly a lot of German lagers.”

As further testament to Russell’s point, it was difficult finding consensus among local bartenders of what local craft beers were the most popular. Some claimed Flying Fish Farmhouse Summer Ale and Yards Brawler were the best sellers. Others pointed to Victory HopDevil or one of the Dogfish Head IPAs.

Supplementing these local craft breweries are brewpubs – breweries that serve food and generate at least 25 percent of their sales on site – that further add to the depth of the beer scene. Among the local brewpubs of note are Triumph Brewing Company, Iron Hill Brewery & Restaurant, Nodding Head Brewery & Restaurant, Manayunk Brewery & Restaurant and Sly Fox Brewhouse & Eatery.

Area bars recognize the importance and popularity of local beers and do their part to promote them. For a July drink special, University City newcomer City Tap House announced a Hundred-Mile Happy Hour. All beers brewed within 100 miles of Philadelphia, which included a good portion of the bar’s 60 draughts, were \$2 off their normal price during happy hour.

Of course, the local craft beers are garnering national recognition as well. Dogfish Head and Victory are each widely available in more than 20 states. And this fall, the Discovery Channel is scheduled to premier its new series, “BREWED,” which will feature Sam Calagione, the owner of Dogfish Head Brewery, and explore life inside the brewery.

THE GROWTH OF PHILLY BEER WEEK

In 2008, Tom Peters, who co-owns several city bars including Monk’s Café; Bruce Nichols, who recently opened up The HeadHouse; and Russell organized the first Philly Beer Week. With modest aims, the inaugural Beer Week proved to be a major success, with more than 300 events. Two years later, the 2010 edition featured about 1,000 events throughout 150 different venues over 10 days, becoming the largest national festival, in terms of number of events, dedicated to craft beers.

Along with the Philly Craft Beer Festival, which highlighted 120 beers made by 50 brewers in its fourth year, Philly Beer Week has enabled the city to become a destination for beer lovers from both the city and beyond. Out-of-town visitors enjoying Philly Beer Week events in June included a professional beer brewer from Vancouver who was well aware of Philadelphia’s beer scene.

“I was surprised the first year – we thought we’d have about 50 events and we ended with 350,” said Russell. “I’m no longer surprised; in fact, I see a lot of room for growth. I don’t judge its success by the number of events, but in the number of people who attend and celebrate Philly beer.”

Other national beer festivals, including the Great American Beer Festival in Denver and the Oregon Brewers Festival, currently attract more estimated attendees than Philly Beer Week, drew an estimated 35,000 people in 2009 – as of now. Given the exponential growth of Philly Beer Week’s events and popularity, that may change.

“That’s what I want to build on,” said Russell. “It’s my aim to make Philly Beer Week the best beer celebration in America, so that when people think of beer, they think of Philly (and not just for one week). Likewise, I want Philly Beer Week to be the city’s largest event of the year – something that can rival the Mummies and Welcome America – so that when people think of Philly, they think of beer.” ■

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Where to Enjoy Craft Beer

The options of where to enjoy good craft beer seem almost as plentiful as the varieties of beer available in Philadelphia. Here are a few selected bars definitely worth a visit.

Standard Tap

www.standardtap.com
2nd and Poplar streets

With 20 beers on tap, all from brewers from the local and surrounding area, there are some who consider gastropub Standard Tap to be the best bar in the city.

Varga Bar

www.vargabar.com
10th and Spruce streets

While turning only one year old this past July, Varga's impressive beer list already draws crowds, particularly in good weather, when they can enjoy outdoor seating on two different sidewalks of the corner bar.

Tria

www.triacafe.com
123 S. 18th St. & 1137 Spruce St.

While known primarily as a wine bar, Tria has a sizable craft beer list for every palate, conveniently grouped into different lists to assist customers.

South Philly Tap Room

www.southphiladelphiataproom.com
1509 Mifflin St.

In addition to serving some surprisingly good food, including one of the best roast pork sandwiches in town, SPTR often features many limited production beers, such as Russian River Pliny the Elder.

Pub on Passyunk East

www.pubonpassyunkeast.com
1501 Passyunk Ave.

In the up-and-coming Passyunk Avenue neighborhood, the P.O.P.E. is a mainstay, with many craft beers on draught, and about 80 high quality bottled beers.